

Training Through Controlling The Reinforcement Rather Than The Dog: Drug Detection Training

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"There are three ways to do things: The wrong way, the proven way and a better way." ~ Author Unknown

Regardless of whether we are training a pet, a sport dog or a working dog, we need to train in a manner that allows the dog to fully understand the task that he is being asked to do. Although I am not specifically opposed to compulsion in training, most of the time incorrect responses on the part of the dog are usually due to poor communication or unrealistic expectations on the part of the trainer. For example, often during training we inadvertently allow an incorrect behavior to be reinforced. If we look carefully we realize that we often fail to reinforce the behavior that we want and oftentimes we actually reinforce the behavior that we don't want. For example - if I leave my patrol dog in a down stay and then release him to the decoy for a bite. What behavior does the bite, something that is highly desired by the dog, reinforce? Is it a reward for the stay or is it reinforcing a fast run to the decoy? Another common reason for an incorrect response on the part of the dog is that we are asking them to perform beyond their current skill set. To use a school analogy, the dog understands the task on a first grade level so we then ask them to perform 10th grade work! Dogs are for the most part inherently honest; their behavior is a direct reflection of how well they understand the exercise and how well they can currently perform it.

By utilizing a training style that controls the reinforcement rather than the dog, he is free to experiment and quickly discard behaviors that do not lead to reinforcement. With this type of training, the role of the trainer is to have complete control of any reinforcements that will cause either correct or incorrect behavior on the dog's part. Throughout the training process, the dog must figure out what behavior(s) will get him that reinforcement he wants. Going through this process creates a clear headed, non-stressed dog who is both accurate and high drive. Many times when working my police and SAR dogs, I have encountered situations in deployments that do not quite fit the training "pattern". A dog trained in this manner has a better chance to think and problem solve and has the confidence to tell the handler that he is wrong when that is the case. For sport dogs, it also produces a prettier picture and behaviors that hold up under stress and pressure. I first started utilizing this style of training while teaching my dogs to track. Most traditional methods either created a methodical accurate dog or a fast driven dog and I really wanted both. I also wanted a thoughtful dog who could reason through the task and problem solve on his own, rather than expecting a certain pattern or looking to me for information. Through experimentation with a variety of methods, I began teaching my dogs to track through targeting. I created a high value for the target and then targeting was a useful method to allow them to teach themselves to track as they are able to achieve their own reinforcement on a continuous basis. My training role is to restrict access to the target/reinforcement if I am not seeing the behavior that I want. In training this way I found that it produces a driven dog that highly motivated to get down the track but maintains the focus and attention to detail that I need. About 18 months ago, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend a "On Target" detection training seminar being given by Randy Hare of Alpha K9 (www.randyhare.com). Randy has raised this "self discovery" method of training to amazing levels with his training of detection dogs. After seeing such an effective method being utilized by such a gifted trainer, I had no trouble seeing how I could expand the concepts that he presented for training detection dogs to the other types of dog training I am involved with. Regardless of the training the dog could find the "path to reinforcement" in a clear and

effective manner. Earlier this year, through Randy's generous support, I was able to attend one of his Trainer's Schools at Alpha K9 with K9 "Steel". Steel is an 18 month old Rottweiler, in training to be my next dual purpose patrol/narcotics police canine.

UNDERSTANDING THE DOG AND HIS REWARD

With Randy's "On Target" detection training, the dog is allowed to "train himself" and learn the path to reinforcement through experimentation and self-discovery. It was amazing to see how much better the dogs are at figuring out the task on their own with no input or directions from the trainer. However, one critical element in this type of training is that the dog has to inherently want the reinforcement. The higher the drive for the reinforcement, the better the dog does with this training technique. However, because the path to reinforcement is entirely under the dog's control the high drive dog is not a hectic and unsettled worker, he stays focused and his drive is channeled into the task. With the On Target method, the behavior is shaped and the dog learns that the handler will create a positive fight at the point of odor. Randy defines positive fight drive as the recognition by the dog that a preferred toy, object or sleeve is more attractive when associated with a fight. Although food reward can work to train some behaviors, it generally does not keep most dogs in the level of drive that we want for detection work. With this system of training we reward with a toy, a simple tennis ball on a rope. However, the toy is merely a means to interact with the handler and, more importantly, create a fight.



DETERMINE THE TRAINING GOAL

What do we want the dog to know In the course of my teaching I often ask my students to put themselves in the place of their dog and describe the exercise we are teaching from the dog's point of view. I do this because it shows the handler that often what we think we are asking for is probably very different from what the dog thinks we want him to do. It also serves to remind us that the task is usually more complicated than we realized. For drug detection, I want my dog to describe the task as follows:

I search all area that I can get to and hunt for the odor of narcotics (cocaine/ heroin/etc). When I smell the odor of narcotics I follow it to source. If I cannot get to the source of the odor I continue to try to get to it by using my nose and paws. If I get frustrated enough and determine that I cannot get to the source I will sit and my handler will make it so I can have access to the source of the odor. Once my nose comes in contact with the source of the odor my handler gives me a fight at exactly the spot of the source of odor.

ASSOCIATING THE BEHAVIOR WITH THE REINFORCER

During the first phase of training, the dogs are introduced to each target detection odor utilizing a series of boxes that allow the trainer to create an association between the fight and the odor. The boxes also allow the trainer to effectively shape the correct response behavior. Each box contains a compartment

that can hold either narcotics or a distraction item. Each box also has a pvc tube that allows the trainer to drop a tennis ball to the dog and give it a fight at exactly the place where the dog is in odor. The dog is exposed to a row of 8 boxes, with only one containing the target odor. We show the dog the ball in the target box and he rushes in and gets a fight at the source of odor. The next time through we wait until the dog hesitates at the correct box and then give him the fight. The dog's response is gradually shaped by progressively waiting for a stronger behavior at the source box prior to giving him the fight. The dog is kept in the area of the rack but not directed or cued in any way to approach the target box. During the fight at the



Steel getting fight at source

box the dog can experiment by pulling the toy away from the box but all fight stops when the dog moves out of odor.

One of the most exciting aspects of this training is watching the dog stand with the toy in his mouth and seeing him gradually, completely on his own, move his mouth and the toy very carefully towards the odor. It is as if he is testing his budding theory that moving the toy to the odor source

gets him a fight.



Steel working the rack

PROOFING AND ADDING DISTRACTION

It is the concept of giving the dog a fight, only at the source of odor that teaches the dog the task. Although the boxes themselves do not teach the dog they help to give the trainer complete control of the reinforcement. From the start of training, the other boxes on the rack contain a variety of other items such as tennis balls, food and other items with distracting odors; however, they are inaccessible to the dog. The dog learns right from the beginning that the only odor that is reinforcing is the target odor. Since the distraction odors are inaccessible, the dog learns to ignore them on his own without needing input from the handler; input which has the potential to make him dependent on the handler or to diminish overall drive. The short rack also allows the dog to experiment with utilizing his other senses, such as sight and sound, to get his reinforcement. However, only through scenting the correct box does he get the fight. Through the work on the short rack the dog teaches himself to trust only his nose to find the correct box and get the fight.

TEACHING THE DOG TO PERFORM THE BEHAVIOR AWAY FROM THE BOXES- THE ORAL GAME

Once the dog is working the rack well, and going to source for the fight, the next step is to move away from the rack and play the "oral game". The oral game is a way for the dog to learn that the scent detection behavior will be reinforcing in all areas, not just at the boxes. The drug "hide" (narcotics within a small container) is placed in a variety of locations where the item can be reached by the dog. Initially the hide is placed out in an

obvious location, on the lawn for example and the reward is delivered when the dog touches his nose/mouth to the hide. The dog learns that he can "make" the handler deliver the fight by touching the hide with his nose. He also learns that "camping out" at the source of odor will ultimately lead to a fight. An interesting behavior that is often seen when playing the oral game is when the handler throws the toy to the dog, the dog often takes the toy to the hide. An obvious sign that he understands that the two things have to get together before the fun happens!



Steel playing oral game

EXPANDING THE DOG'S SKILL SET- PUZZLES

Through the oral game we gradually make the location of the hide more and more challenging but the dog can always get from odor detection to the source of the odor each time. The next step in shaping the behavior is to introduce obstacles between the dog and the hide. Through this process, we further shape the behavior so that the dog expands his skill set and learns to work through obstacles to get to the source of odor. Like with the rack and then the oral game, he then gets the fight when he has solved the "puzzle" and got to the source of odor. The puzzles are usually a pile of miscellaneous items that make getting to the hide difficult, but not impossible. They are generally made up of items that can be pawed or nosed out of the way so the dog can get to the hide. Dogs usually love the puzzles and both this and the oral game make for a fun game and good exercise as well as training.



Steel working puzzle

THE FINAL STEP: THE REAL WORLD

The progression from puzzles to the "real world" is probably a lot more noticeable to the handler than it is to the dog. The real world from the dog's perspective is just a series of puzzles in varying complexities. In addition, the dog will often encounter hides where he cannot physically get to the source of odor. However, due to the shaping process with the puzzles, he knows that if he continues to attempt to get to the source of odor he will eventually be successful. With Steel's training, due to my department's preferences, I wanted him to do a "passive" alert. When he cannot get to the source of odor he performs an unprompted sit as opposed to an "active" alert dog that would dig and scratch. Overall, his behavior before and after his sit alert is very clear behavior to me that he is in the odor of narcotics and, as Randy Hare puts it, "we had better be getting the handcuffs out!"



Steel searching a vehicle